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RAIDERS OF THE LOST ART
by Stephen Perloff

While there were no harrowing escapes from booby-trapped caverns or other feats of derring-do, the recovery of a large number of vintage prints by Mike Disfarmer is nearly as exciting a tale as the various adventures of Indiana Jones. The story of Mike Disfarmer, while known among many photography aficionados, has not been widely known by the general public. And some of what was known had been shrouded in myth and misunderstanding. The work of Disfarmer first came to light in the mid-1970s, culminating with an exhibition at the **International Center of Photography** in New York and the publication of the book *Disfarmer: The Heber Springs Portraits* by Addison House, both in 1976.

As **Julia Scully** wrote in that book, "Mike Disfarmer's photographs were saved from oblivion by Joe Allbright of Heber Springs, Arkansas. Allbright purchased the negatives [about 3,000] after the photographer's death in 1959. Fourteen years later, in 1973, he brought them to the attention of **Peter Miller**, then editor of *The Arkansas Sun*, a weekly newspaper in Heber Springs.

"Miller published the portraits in *The Sun* for a year; recognizing the value of the work, he sent a few prints to me at *Modern Photography* magazine. I shared this enthusiasm and suggested that we join together to bring Disfarmer's work to the attention of a larger audience. This book is the result."

Disfarmer's work was a revelation. Working as a small town studio photographer he had compiled a portrait of a farming community that was comparable to any of the great bodies of portraiture in photography — from Southworth & Hawes and August Sander to Diane Arbus, Irving Penn, and Richard Avedon. Indeed, like these photographers, it was comparable to the great bodies of portraiture in any medium. This particular body of work, covering the years 1939 to 1946, was taken at the key historical moment as Heber Springs was emerging out of the chaos of the Depression and into the maelstrom of the Second World War.

IN THIS ISSUE

Raiders of the Lost Art 1
In the Wake of Katrina 7
Gallery Row 8
Museum and Not-for-Profit Row 8
News 9
In Passing 10
Auction Schedule 11
Courses, Lectures, and Seminars 13
Trade Shows and Fairs 14
Limited Editions 16
Catalogues & Publications 16
Exhibitions of Note 17

Disfarmer was an odd man out in Heber Springs. In a community of deep religious faith, he did not attend church. In a community of large families, he was a bachelor who had no truly close friends. Indeed, he had legally changed his name from Meyer to Disfarmer, distancing himself from both his birth family (he came up with his own personal creation myth that he had been taken away from his true birth family by a tornado and deposited by chance with the Meyer family) and from the farmers who were his main customers.

From Disfarmer's glass plate negatives later prints were made, in a portfolio and for sale individually through galleries (**Staley-Wise** and **Howard Greenberg** among them; the Howard Greenberg Gallery has represented the Disfarmer archive since 2000) and the website disfarmer.com. But since those early years, vintage prints have become the Holy Grail of the photography art market. And despite Scully's tantalizing statement that "[m]any of these originals are still to be found in the photo albums of Heber Springs families," (p. 3) only a few vintage prints had surfaced, mostly on eBay.

In 2004, all that was to change.

Ashleigha and David Pratt, a young couple who had grown up in Heber Springs and relocated to Chicago, had compiled a collection of 50 vintage Disfarmers and approached appraiser, writer, and curator **Lorraine Anne Davis** to help them. In the first of many gestures that indicate that his whole project would not have been possible without the internet, the Pratt's had found Davis through her website (www.lorrainedavis.com). They wanted to sell the collection, but didn't know how to go about it. So Davis agreed to broker the deal rather than add the expense of an appraisal to any commission they would have paid someone else. (Her appraisal fees are $125 per hour and conservation fees about $100 for superficial conservation .) Davis does not normally broker, but the Pratts were a nice couple and had no idea who to approach.

First Davis cleaned, retouched, and matted all the work, and did an in-depth condition report. Then in January 2004 she went to **photo la** without the pictures and approached several galleries. Like all the publishers who are kicking themselves after turning down J. K. Rowling, one declined with the statement that there was no market for vintage Disfarmer prints. Another dealer was very interested but didn't have the money to buy the whole group.

Davis had divided the 50 prints into four groups — A, B, C, D — from those that were the most interesting and in the best condition to those that were the least interesting and in the worst condition, with $2,500 the price for the A group. The highest price realized that Davis had found had been $800 to $1,200 for three sold on eBay. When she couldn't initially find a dealer who would make the deal, **Monika Half** suggested she talk to collector **Michael Mattis**, who was known to buy whole collections. Half got Mattis and Davis together in February. (They each gave her a small commission of $500.) Mattis didn't seem to know much about Mike Disfarmer at first, but embraced the project enthusiastically and asked her not to tell anyone about it. After some back and forth negotiations on a price for all the prints, they reached an agreement at $60,000. Davis took a small commission of $4,000. Clearly at that time Mattis paid more than the going rate.

The Pratts were pleased with the deal and came up with a second group of 30 prints, which were overall not as nice as the first group, after trips back to Heber Springs for Easter and the Fourth of July. Using the same valuation, Mattis agreed to buy this group as well, with a volume discount of just under 20%, but he paid $1,500 of Davis's $3,000 commission from the second group (she charged for some uncompensated work on the first group this time).

According to Davis, David Pratt had spent hundreds and hundreds of hours scanning the images and "fixing" the digital copies in Adobe Photoshop in order to replace the vintage pieces that the families were pulling from their albums."

At the time that Mattis bought the Pratt's pictures, he thought these were the first and last vintage Disfarmer's that would come on the market. But, as Mattis told me, "The news of this sale hit Heber Springs like a tsunami." He was soon contacted "by a handful of entrepreneurial types who had some of their own and proposed to work for me."

Mattis was concerned lest he be considered a carpetbagger and viewed educating the community about Mike Disfarmer as important. Certainly there had been stories that some art dealers had flown down to Arkansas in search of vintage prints years before "only to have doors slammed in their faces by the untrusting locals." As Mattis writes in the afterword to the book that accompanies the current exhibition at the **Edwynn Houk Gallery**, "From the outset, an integral part of the project was educating an initially skeptical rural community that their albums of old family photos were likely to contain objects of significant artistic and cultural value that could — and indeed should — be brought to the attention of a wider audience. To this end, art researcher **Hava Gurevich** joined the project to gather oral history and perform genealogical research. In addition, members of the team worked closely with the **Cleburne County Historical Society**, providing materials for exhibitions that celebrated Disfarmer's achievement. Today, after nearly two years, it can categorically be stated that the bulk of Disfarmer's extant oeuvre has been recovered."

Some of the local team worked for a month gathering the low-lying fruit and stopped after they exhausted their immediate circle; others made it a full-time job. (Now it's down to a trickle although Mattis is still negotiating for a couple of family collections.)

Mattis had to extensively train his local team in terms of picture and print quality. As he told **Philip Gefter** of ***The New York Times***, "'There is image quality and there is print quality,' ... saying he preferred subjects wearing overalls instead of suits, and with serious expressions rather than smiles. If the print was yellow, creased, flushed out in the highlights, or had a flat tonal range, he wasn't interested. Eventually, he said, his representatives in Heber Springs were giving him 'the same kind of condition report you'd get from Sotheby's or Christie's.'"

Hava Gurevich had worked with Mattis in the past and serendipitously it was a period between projects for her. She went down to Arkansas and lived there over a five-month period from September 2004 to January 2005. Previously the agents had communicated by e-mail and phone with Mattis, but now did so through her. At first she was shown pictures that belonged to relatives, then friends' relatives. She accompanied one man, an eBay seller who scoured garage sales and flea markets and whose mother had 20 Disfarmer prints, and who enlisted two women to help find images, and she interviewed people who had Disfarmer pictures. The two women went down dirt roads and knocked on doors in search of original Disfarmer prints. At first the two women sold to the man, who did business directly with Mattis. Later they sold directly to him.

The agents would scan and upload the images, then go over condition; Mattis came back with a number and then they negotiated. Usually this was for groups of pictures. Gurevich herself had come to do research and stayed out of the money end of things.

They also scanned and printed copies to give to the families so they could retain their family history. Like David Pratt's, many of the new prints were better than the originals.

Elderly residents who had sold them their pictures called the women to refer others (and got a bonus). Gurevich went to interview them. She found that most people didn't remember Disfarmer and that what they knew was more the mythology, but once in a while new information would surface. And of course by now some of the subjects were in nursing homes or had dementia. About half the people knew Disfarmer was known in the art world. Gurevich stressed to all of them that this was an historical reclamation project.

The agents paid more and more as the project went on. For many of Cleburne County's residents this was like miracle money that fell from the sky. Prices were generally $50 to $75 for uninteresting images up to $800, and toward the end $1,000 to $2,000 when they competed against Kasher. One of the women agents visited the elderly long after she bought pictures from them; the other helped her community and church financially.

"It was interesting to be in that culture and be an outsider but live with them," Gurevich told me. "I tried not to view their lifestyle or aspirations from my point of view. There were few women over 18 without children and many of them never finished high school. But it is a close community with many people having the same friends since elementary school."

Gurevich is starting a new project with Mattis, leaving her current position with the **Tom Gitterman Gallery** to run **art2art.org**, which will tour photography and other art shows, including work by Edward Steichen, Sally Mann, Roger Fenton, Julia Margaret Cameron, Bill Brandt, Larry Clark, and Bill Owens, as well as theme shows.

Of the more than 3,100 prints Mattis purchased, he sold about 1,000 to Edwynn Houk. Houk's first job was handling the Sander Estate when he worked for **Tom Halsted** and he has had an affinity for small, vintage prints by the likes of Jacques Henri Lartigue and André Kertész, so he seemed like a good choice.

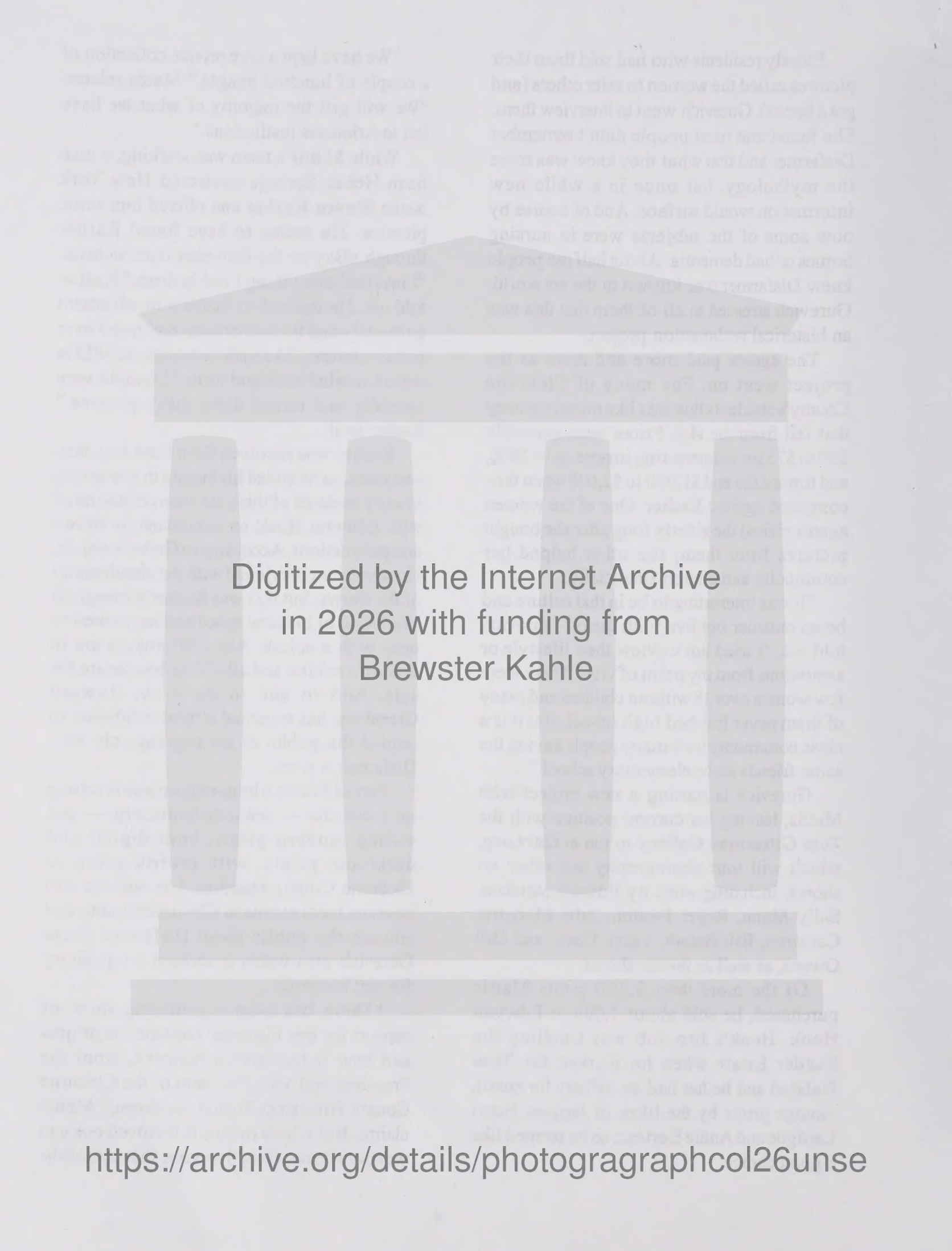
"We have kept a core private collection of a couple of hundred images," Mattis relates. "We will gift the majority of what we have left to Arkansas institutions."

While Mattis's team was working, a man from Heber Springs contacted New York dealer **Steven Kasher** and offered him some pictures. He seems to have found Kasher through eBay or the disfarmer.com website. "I invested everything I had in them," Kasher told me. He learned of Mattis's involvement quite early and the two of them competed over certain pictures, like a silent auction, as JPEGs were e-mailed back and forth. "I bought very carefully and turned down many pictures," Kasher said.

Kasher was involved for a little less than two years, as he ended his buying in late spring or early summer of this year, then collaborated with Edwynn Houk on simultaneous shows and publications. According to Gefter's article, Houk was not overjoyed with the simultaneity of the shows, but this was Kasher's inaugural exhibition at his new space and he wanted to open with a splash. About 90 images are in Kasher's exhibit and all 400 he bought are for sale. And to add to the stew, Howard Greenberg has mounted a third exhibition to remind the public of his ongoing role with Disfarmer's work.

Part of Mattis's long-range plans is setting up a website — www.disfarmer.org — and selling modern prints, both digital and darkroom prints, with profits going to Cleburne County charities. The website will promote local events in Cleburne County and educate the public about Disfarmer. Hava Gurevich also wants to make it a repository for oral histories.

"There has been a gratifying show of support for this historical reclamation project and how it has been conducted, from the President and Vice President of the Cleburne County Historical Society on down," Mattis claims. But where money is involved one can wonder if everything has gone that smoothly.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https://archive.org/details/photogragraphcol26unse

Reportedly the Pratts didn't want to see a market at inflated prices and would have liked to see their collection stay together (they were family pictures), but Mattis couldn't agree. The Pratt's were eventually upset at the prices (Houk's prices are $7,500 to $28,000 — he reportedly sold about 50 prints before the show at $12,000 to $28,000 — and Kasher's prices are $10,000–$30,000) but there had been no previous market and Mattis and Houk and Kasher had the wherewithal to demand those prices. And Mattis had to buy the bad stuff (including a number of very generic baby pictures) to get the rest. Plus some were in terrible condition. Mattis avers that with the sale to Houk he recouped most, though not all, of his seven-figure investment.

Some Cleburne County residents might wonder if they might have done better selling to Mattis directly rather than through Mattis's agents. And the Pratts may have had trouble explaining to relatives why some of their pictures were worth $25 and others $600. About the Pratts, Lorraine Davis said, "It would have been nice if David had gotten a little more, but it was a very fair price at the time — double the going price."

Lorraine Davis also recounted the personal problems in the community. "There was a lot of neighborhood in-fighting with someone who was selling to Michael and (I assume) Kasher insinuating to neighbors that David and Ashleigha were ripping people off, which hurt the Pratts terribly. They felt that they were doing the families a huge service by giving them beautiful digital reproductions. He would spend *hours* retouching one image and probably invested 500 hours into that alone. So he was making even less per hour. Also, they were making some money and they were getting some money to their families, but when they were accused by neighbors (or a local troublemaker trying to knock them out of the selling market/competition) they were completely distraught and very happy when it was all over. They got their money and got out because it was causing so many interfamily and internal family problems. When one woman sold a baby picture and got only $75 for it, she wanted the picture back. Michael was particularly generous to the images the Pratts offered as they had started the whole thing. He *never* paid $75 for an unsaleable baby picture to anyone else but the Pratts."

In an August 30 article titled "Disfarmer Pictures Stir Controversy," **Randy Kemp**, the current ***Sun-Times*** editor, wrote, "Not everyone sees something positive about the flurry of buying and selling. 'I think people were ripped off,' said Peter Miller, the personal injury attorney in Little Rock. Miller, also from New York originally but who lived in Heber Springs for a time in the early 1970s, was instrumental in bringing Allbright's collection of Disfarmer images to light.

"'It's like a couple of slick New York promoters came into town and took advantage of people,' he said. 'These guys bought cheap and they're selling high.'

"Miller, who founded the *Arkansas Sun* in 1975, said he has heard from several people who sold prints to buyers going door to door, and he is concerned because some were promised that some of the profits 'will go back to Heber Springs in some positive way.'"

In a later conversation with me, Miller, while perturbed that he was edited out of Disfarmer's history in **Alan Trachtenberg**'s essay in the Kasher/Steidl book and the way he was treated by Mattis, said that as a personal injury lawyer in Arkansas who represented plaintiffs, he was initially leery of the stereotyped New York hustler ripping off the local rubes, but admitted that he had been wrong. He called around back in Heber Springs and people seemed satisfied that they were treated well and paid decent money for something they thought was worthless. Miller has promoted Disfarmer's work for 30 years — he personally made the prints for the portfolio — and was "responding emotionally," as he put it. But he seems to have

come around and acknowledges that the Kashe/Steidl book is "beautifully done." (He hadn't seen the Mattis book yet.) "There are especially interesting images that I hadn't seen," Miller told me. "I had no knowledge of Disfarmer's work much before 1940."

Also, Miller credits Julia Scully for playing "an extremely profound part" in bringing Disfarmer's work to the public. "She had the connections and the real knowledge," he said and her role is "often overlooked."

Prior to this project Disfarmer had been known only for the seven years from 1939 to 1946. The pictures Mattis and Kasher acquired extends his career from 1917, when he was in partnership in the Penrose and Meyer studio, to 1957.

Miller said, "I can't quite decide whether Disfarmer was an artist or not — how intentional he was. There is no experimentation and in one way they are all the same picture.... But I believe that art is judged by the finished product." And ultimatley for Miller he views the project as quite positive, as it rekindles an interest in the work itself.

Steve Kasher shares the view that Disfarmer is "one of the great portraitists period from around the world and in any medium. The people of Heber Springs had a need to be memorialized and there was a synchrony with Disfarmer's own concerns" in portraying them. "Most portraits [in the art market] are of celebrities. There are few portraits of everyday people with such depth."

Lorraine Anne Davis wrote in an e-mail, "Received a catalogue from Edwynn...what great PHOTOS!!!! and a small fraction is from the Pratt family...certainly the most interesting ones aren't. Now I know why Michael was so excited. He really did a good thing. We never would have seen these *in toto* had it not been for Michael. It is the absolute *Spoon River Anthology* that Strand tried so hard to capture but missed every time on account of his 'pristine-ness.' This IS Edgar Lee Master's Spoon River!!!!

And Michael Mattis, echoing my own sentiments written in 1978, proclaims that "Disfarmer the artist was the ultimate insider and the ultimate outsider...." And, he adds, "After the discovery of his work in 1974 people have spent 30 years trying to find other comparable small town photographers — but there are none."

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Books and exhibitions mentioned in this article:

Disfarmer: The Vintage Prints, foreword by Edwynn Houk, introduction by Gerd Sander, essay by Richard B. Woodward, afterword by Michael P. Mattis (New York: powerHouse Books, 2005), $60 hb.

Mike Disfarmer: Original Disfarmer Photographs, foreword by Steven Kasher, essay by Alan Trachtenberg (Göttingen/New York: Steidl/Steven Kasher Gallery, 2005), $45 hb.

(Kasher donated 100% of the proceeds from the sale of this book at his September 8 opening reception to the Red Cross for Hurricane Katrina relief; the amount exceeded $1,000.)

Disfarmer: The Vintage Prints Edwynn Houk Gallery, 745 5th Avenue, New York, NY 10151, (212) 750-7070, M–F 11–6, through October 15.

Original Disfarmer Photographs Steven Kasher Gallery, 521 West 23rd Street, 2nd floor, New York, NY, 10011, (212) 966-3978, T–Sat 11–6, through October 29.